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The Old Man and the CIA: A Kennedy Plot to Kill Castro?

by DAVID CORN & GUS RUSSO

Did John and Robert Kennedy plot murder? For decades, a clear answer to that dicey question has evaded historians, while Kennedy loyalists have fought hard to prevent such a stain from befouling the memory of the brothers. But a thirty-nine-year-old Pentagon memorandum—found three years ago by a college professor and heretofore unpublicized—suggests that Jack and Bobby discussed and apparently sanctioned the development of a possible assassination attempt against Fidel Castro during a 1962 meeting in the Oval Office. And—in a weirder-than-fiction twist—the scheme they considered involved Ernest Hemingway's farm outside Havana.

It's no secret now that President Kennedy and his brother the Attorney General wanted Fidel Castro out of the way. After Castro thwarted the Kennedy-approved and CIA-orchestrated invasion at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, the Kennedys continued to seek means of toppling the Cuban leader. In early 1962, according to a CIA memo, Bobby Kennedy told a group of CIA and Pentagon officials that a solution to the Cuban problem carried "the top priority in the United States government—all else is secondary." Soon after, the CIA, which had begun planning murder plots against Castro during the Eisenhower Administration, was again devising a variety of assassination plans—efforts that would involve an exploding seashell, poison pills, a toxin-contaminated diving suit and Mafia associates. Ever since this clandestine activity started becoming public in the 1970s, former CIA officers have maintained that John and Robert Kennedy were fully aware of and supportive of the agency's lethal intentions, that the CIA conspirators were not rogues but loyal civil servants following orders. Kennedy defenders countered that no piece of paper shows that the pair specifically endorsed or authorized hit jobs.

In his *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, historian and former Kennedy Administration official Arthur Schlesinger Jr. passionately declared, "The available evidence clearly leads to the conclusion that the Kennedys did not know about the Castro assassination plots before the Bay of Pigs or about the pursuit of those plots by the CIA after the Bay of Pigs. No one who knew John and Robert Kennedy well believed they would conceivably countenance a program

of assassination.... I, too, find the idea incredible that these two men, so filled with love of life and so conscious of the ironies of history, could thus deny all the values and purposes that animated their existence." (In 1998, at Schlesinger's urging, the *New York Times* published an "editor's note" saying that while some "historians and officials with knowledge of intelligence matters...have asserted" that JFK ordered the CIA to assassinate Castro, "others, also close to the President, dispute their account.") In his recent biography of Robert Kennedy, Evan Thomas, the assistant managing editor of *Newsweek*, wrote, "RFK's own views on assassination in this period have remained difficult to ascertain.... Kennedy's closest aides flatly denied that he ever ordered an assassination or discussed the possibility." The Pentagon document—once classified Top Secret—was released by the Assassination Records Review Board in late 1997, and its significance was first noticed by Larry Haapanen, a professor at Lewis and Clark State College. The memo records a meeting of senior national security officials in the Oval Office on March 16, 1962. It was written shortly after the afternoon gathering by Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale, whom President Kennedy had placed in charge of Operation Mongoose, a new interagency project cooked up in November 1961 with the ultimate goal of overthrowing Castro. Present for the conversation were McGeorge Bundy, National Security Adviser; John McCone, Director of Central Intelligence; Gen. Maxwell Taylor, military adviser to the President; Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Roswell Gilpatric, deputy secretary of the Defense Department; U. Alexis Johnson, a deputy under secretary at the State Department; and Lansdale. The subject at hand was setting presidential guidelines for Operation Mongoose. Lansdale reported on efforts to train anti-Castro Cuban agents in guerrilla warfare. President Kennedy told the group he would not yet approve any direct US military intervention in Cuba. Next, the conversation turned to another matter. This is how Lansdale captured it in his "memorandum for the record":

The Attorney General then mentioned Mary Hemingway [Ernest Hemingway's widow], commenting on reports that Castro was drinking heavily in disgruntlement over the way things were going, and the opportunities offered by the "shrine" to Hemingway. I commented that this was a conversation that Ed Murrow [the former news broadcaster then heading the US Information Agency] had had with Mary Hemingway, that we had similar reports from other sources, and that this was worth assessing firmly and pursuing vigorously. If there are grounds for action, CIA had some invaluable assets which might well be committed for such an effort. McCone asked if his operational people were aware of this; I told him that we had discussed this, that they agreed the subject was worth vigorous development, and that we were in agreement that the matter was *so delicate and sensitive* that it shouldn't be surfaced to the Special Group [an elite interagency group that reviewed covert actions] until we were ready to go, and then not in detail. I pointed out that this all pertained to *fractioning the regime*. If it happened, it could develop like a brush-fire, much as in Hungary, and we must be prepared to help it win our goal of Cuba freed of a Communist government. [Emphasis added.]

In the memo, Lansdale mentioned no further details about an operation that could take advantage of the Hemingway "shrine," a reference to the farm Hemingway had owned in Cuba, which was then being converted into a museum. He was writing in his own sort of covert-op-speak. In another memo, he used a term similar to "fractioning the regime" to refer to anti-Castro actions that included the assassination of Castro. (An August 13, 1962, Lansdale memo employed the phrase "splitting the regime" to describe activities "including liquidation of leaders.") With Operation Mongoose ultimately aimed at

prompting a popular uprising in Cuba, the Kennedy men could well have been hoping that an assassination would spark such a "brush-fire."

Lansdale's description of the Hemingway plan as "so delicate and sensitive" that its specifics should be hidden from the Special Group is another tip-off that the operation involved assassination. "That's the giveaway," says Peter Kornbluh, a senior analyst at the National Security Archive and a specialist on US documents regarding Cuba. "This is the closest thing to a smoking gun that has been declassified. Only assassination would be taboo for open discussion at the Special Group, which routinely planned sabotage, violence and chaos to undermine Castro."

Loch Johnson, an intelligence expert who worked on the Senate Church Committee (which first disclosed the CIA assassination plots in 1975), says the Lansdale document is "a fascinating memo. It looks like another one of the plots against Castro." Several CIA alumni support this interpretation.

Ted Shackley, who served as Miami chief of station during Operation Mongoose, remarks, "It certainly has the earmarks of an assassination plot." Samuel Halpern, who was the number-two to the officer who ran the CIA end of Operation Mongoose, calls the document "as close as we're likely to get" to conclusive proof. And a former CIA director says, "The language of the memo speaks for itself. The only thing Robert Kennedy can be referring to is the assassination of Castro. This paragraph should never have been written."

It is not clear what specific operation Robert Kennedy was referring to at the March 16 meeting. Neither Halpern nor Shackley recalls receiving orders for a mission involving the Hemingway farm. Those Mongoose records that have been declassified do not refer to an assassination attempt at the Hemingway home. And none of the meeting's participants are alive. Kennedy's Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, who was scheduled to attend this session but did not, says of this conversation and the Hemingway-shrine operation, "I don't know anything about it. The whole Mongoose thing was insane."

The March 16, 1962, meeting occurred at a time when Operation Mongoose was revving up. Lansdale was busy concocting plans for infiltrating Cuba with commando and sabotage teams. The CIA's Miami station was hurriedly recruiting agents in Cuba. At another Mongoose session five days later, Robert Kennedy, who was the de facto supervisor of the covert campaign against Castro, raised the prospect of kidnapping top-level Cuban leaders. (The previous year Robert Kennedy had been informed that the CIA had attempted to kill Castro before the Bay of Pigs invasion.) In April 1962 the CIA's murder plots against Castro were reactivated. That month, Shackley and Bill Harvey, the CIA official in charge of operations against Cuba, delivered a U-Haul filled with arms to a mob-linked hoodlum named John Rosselli, who was supposed to transfer the weapons to Cuban exiles interested in murdering Castro. (The available historical record shows no other Mongoose meetings attended by President Kennedy.)

According to Lansdale's memo, the discussion of this particular operation had been triggered by comments made by Mary Hemingway, who had had a brief encounter with Castro eight months earlier. On July 2, 1961, Ernest Hemingway killed himself with a shotgun in Ketchum, Idaho. Shortly after that, Mary Hemingway, his fourth wife, decided to travel to Cuba to visit Finca Vigia, the farm Hemingway owned outside Havana, and retrieve manuscripts, paintings and other belongings. Before she left Ketchum, a Cuban government official phoned and said that Cuba wanted to establish a museum at Finca Vigia. Because there was a US ban on travel to Cuba, Mary enlisted the assistance of William Walton, a journalist and artist close to President Kennedy. Walton asked the President for help, and within hours Mary was cleared for the trip. Valerie Danby-Smith, who had been Hemingway's secretary (and who would later marry his youngest son and assume the Hemingway name), accompanied the widow. When the two women arrived at the end of July, according to Valerie Hemingway, Castro sent them a big basket of fruit and word that if they required assistance they should contact him, for he was a Hemingway fan. And several nights later, Castro came calling. In her autobiography, Mary Hemingway, who died in 1986, noted that Castro "arrived in his jeep, accompanied only by one nondescript car." He had brought just a few aides with him, no battalion of bodyguards. "There was not much security, and that impressed Mary," Valerie Hemingway recalls. Mary lined up the servants to

who say that too

specifically prohibited by Mongoose

or anywhere

greet the Cuban chief. Castro came into the house. Mary served him coffee. They discussed the transfer of Finca Vigia to the Cuban government; Castro reminisced about having fished with Ernest. "Much of the conversation was banter," Valerie Hemingway says. Castro inspected the mounted animal heads and asked to see where Hemingway had written his stories. Mary guided him to the three-story tower she had built as a writing studio for Ernest several yards from the main house. ("Ernest hated the tower and always wrote in his bedroom," Valerie Hemingway notes.)

At the tower, Castro, without waiting for his aides, bounded up the stairs to the office on the top floor, and Mary followed. "Mary was also impressed with that," Valerie Hemingway says. "She thought that any other national leader would have ordered an aide to go up ahead of him. Make sure it was safe. It was an ideal place to do in Castro. She would remark on that many times over the years."

In the weeks afterward, Mary and Valerie sorted out the mess at Finca Vigia; Hemingway had started coming there in 1938, but he had not been back since the late 1950s. They reviewed thousands of pages of unpublished work, burned his personal papers (in accordance with his wishes), labeled the animal heads (who shot it, when and where), put the house in order for display and packed up possessions Mary wished to keep. Since they could only take hand luggage with them on the return flight to Miami, they arranged for a shrimp boat heading to Tampa for repairs to transport crates holding Hemingway's papers, paintings by Paul Klee, Juan Gris and André Masson, and other keepsakes. From September 1961 to January 1962, Mary Hemingway, still in shock over her husband's suicide (she considered it a gun accident), stayed in Idaho.

Sometime around February, she returned to her flat in New York City. And she shared with her friends stories about her trip to Cuba, her meeting with Castro and how she had managed to spirit Hemingway's papers and the paintings out of Cuba. In the second week of March, stories appeared in the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* about her time in Cuba, though neither mentioned Castro's light security detail and his cavalier climb to the top of the tower. One of her friends, Clifton Daniel, the assistant managing editor at the *Times* and husband of Margaret Truman, contacted US Information Agency chief Edward R. Murrow and suggested that he speak with Mary Hemingway. As Murrow replied to Daniel in a March 20, 1962, letter, "Mary Hemingway did call. We had an interesting and useful conversation and I passed her remarks on to one or two interested parties down here." (The USIA was a participant in Operation Mongoose. Daniels and Murrow are deceased.)

"The tower could be the key to it," Valerie Hemingway says. "It was what impressed Mary Hemingway the most about Castro." Valerie Hemingway insists that Mary Hemingway would not have consciously aided or abetted a scheme against Castro. In her autobiography, Mary recalled attending a dinner at the White House in April 1962, where she "irked" President Kennedy by calling his confrontational position toward Cuba "stupid, unrealistic and, worse, ineffective."

Assassinating Castro at the Hemingway site does seem far-fetched. But in the secret war against Castro, the US government entertained many bizarre ideas, including dusting his shoes with a chemical that would cause his beard to fall out. One scheme called for the use of pyrotechnics to light up the Cuban sky in order to convince the Cuban people that the Second Coming was at hand; presumably, they would then rise up to overthrow Castro. ("Elimination